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A Malbone Miniature

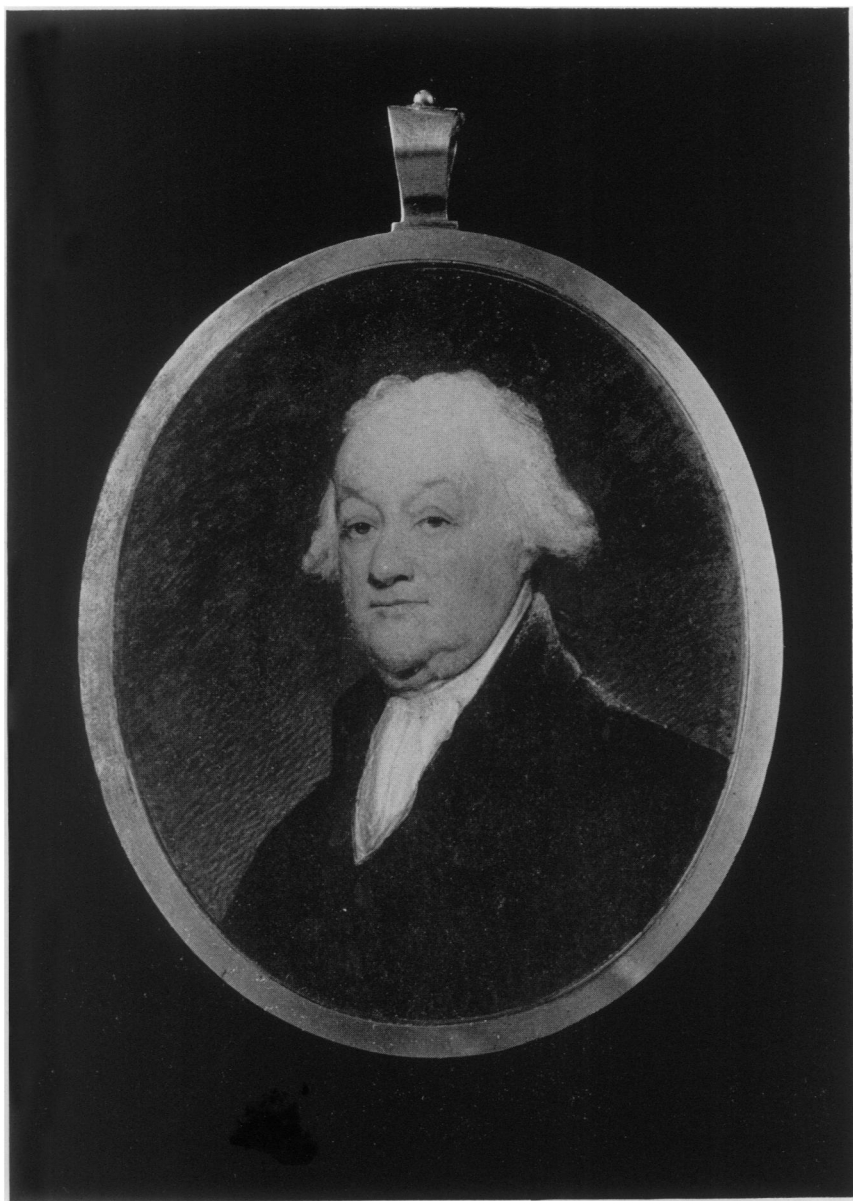
THE Museum has been fortunate in acquiring recently, through a bequest of Miss Elizabeth Ellen Keating, a miniature by Edward Greene Malbone, foremost American miniaturist. It is a portrait of Colonel John Nixon, and is signed in full by the artist, and dated 1796. By this date it falls into Malbone's earlier and less sophisticated period, before he had visited London where, under the patronage of Benjamin West, then President of the Royal Academy, he received much gratifying recognition and opportunity to develop his remarkable technique.

Malbone, like a number of early American artists, was entirely self-taught. His first artistic endeavor was to execute a "landscape set" for the theatre at his birthplace, Newport. The success of this attempt impelled him, after further developing his latent talent, to move to Providence and to take up painting, especially portraiture, as a life work. After two years in Providence, he spent some time in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, where he gained widespread repute and obtained orders for miniatures from the members of many distinguished families. In 1801 he went to London, accompanied by his life-long friend, Washington Allston. There West was much struck by the young artist's ability and tried to persuade him to remain in England. But his efforts were of no avail; Malbone returned to America and settled in Charleston, whence he made periodical visits to the North, painting miniatures with great success in various cities until his death in 1807.

Allston, in writing of his friend, said, "he had the happy talent of elevating the character without impairing the likeness. This was remarkable in his male heads, and no woman ever lost beauty under his hand. To this he had a grace of execution all his own." This grace of execution comprised a line remarkable for its firmness and accuracy, an incomparable delicacy of touch, and above all a sense of color which has never been surpassed, giving to his miniatures that irresistible charm which made him the equal if not the peer of the best foreign painters "in little."

Although it was in his portraits of women that Malbone found the greatest scope for his talent, yet the likeness of Nixon, on exhibition at the Museum, is an excellent example of his best work. He has apparently delineated accurately the character of this Colonel in the Revolutionary Army, who served gallantly under Washington at the battle of Princeton and spent the gruelling winter of 1778 with the troops at Valley Forge, and who, after the War, was one of the organizers and second President of the Bank of North America, in which latter capacity he was serving when Malbone executed this portrait. It is not uninteresting, too, to call attention to the fact that John Nixon was chosen by popular appointment to proclaim for the first time publicly the Declaration of Independence at the State House, July 8, 1776.

H. H. F. J.



MINIATURE BY EDWARD GREENE MALBONE
Portrait of John Nixon